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ABSTRACT

Until about two decades ago, researchers considered career maturity primarily in terms of adolescents who struggled with the tasks that, when successfully completed, resulted in a viable career choice. Previously it has been suggested that the term "career adaptability" should replace the term "career maturity" in the study of adult vocational development. Vocational development does not end with career choice, but depends in adulthood on the individual's ability to meet vocational tasks adaptively. Whereas adolescent vocational development progresses as the individual's career maturity increases, adult vocational development progresses as the individual's career adaptability increases. Vocational development does not end with career choice, but depends in adulthood on the ability to adapt rather than on the level of maturity. Recent research projects have examined: (1) adults in the establishment stage of career development in order to discern the adaptive tasks and coping strategies of the vocational developmental tasks of that stage; (2) health-care employees in the maintenance stage of career development; and (3) two models of mentoring and how mentoring helps adults adapt to tasks that arise in both the exploration stage and the maintenance stage. (ABL)

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Career Adaptability in Adult Vocational Development

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Abstract

Super suggested that the term "career adaptability" replace the term "career maturity" in the study of adult vocational development. Vocational development does not end with career choice, but depends in adulthood on the individual's ability to meet vocational tasks adaptively. Whereas adolescent vocational development progresses as the individual's career maturity increases, adult vocational development progresses as the individual's career adaptability increases.

Career Adaptability in Adult Vocational Development

Until about two decades ago, researchers considered career maturity primarily in terms of adolescents who struggled with the tasks that, when successfully completed, result in viable career choice. Super (1983) wrote that part of the reason for the attention to adolescent and early adulthood career tasks lay in the use of the Matching Model as the guideline for assessment: a good fit between abilities and interests of the client and level and field of work results in work satisfaction and success. Unfortunately, many adolescent clients lacked awareness of self as well as of the world of work; thus, self-descriptions they reported during counseling rendered the Matching Model inadequate to meet their needs. Counselors needed a means to help clients become ready and able to consider and make career decisions. In response to this need, researchers (Super, 1974; Crites, 1974) developed models of career maturity. The term "career maturity" denotes how well an individual is able to cope with vocational tasks when compared with age and life-stage cohorts (Super, 1977).

Consistent with his focus on vocational development, Super (1977) developed a model of career maturity in adults. He retained the five basic dimensions of the career maturity model in adolescents: Planfulness or Time Perspective,

Exploration, Information, Decision Making, and Reality Orientation. Changes within these five dimensions reflected content rather than process: adults differ from adolescents in the information they need, the life stage tasks they face, and the type of decisions they consider. Continued research led Super and Knasel (1981) to explore a problem that arose in the study of career maturity in adulthood: the term itself.

Maturation, Super and Knasel (1981) wrote,

> implies a growth process, an ontogenetic pattern which, although highly dependent upon and modifiable by relevant environmental cues and pressures, unfolds according to a general blueprint which is common to all representative members of a species or definable subgroup. (p. 196)

They argued that the concept of career maturation should parallel the concept of maturation by following the same pattern. Indeed, the concept fits when used to describe adolescent vocational development; it does not fit well when used to describe adult vocational development. The validity of two assumptions that are needed to support its use is questionable: (1) that individual adults will be faced with predictable vocational tasks regardless of their different level and field of endeavor and (2) that different skills are needed to master developmental tasks at different ages. Super and Knasel cited that the difficulty with the first assumption lay in an unpredictable labor market that

presents novel tasks to workers across the age spectrum. The second assumption, they wrote, is researchable.

To solve the immediate problem the term "career maturity" presents, Super and Knasel (1981) suggested the term "career adaptability" as more appropriate for adult vocational development. This term eliminates the difficulty proffered by the reference to the maturational process. They also pointed out its parallel to Piaget's model of adaptation (Piaget, 1952). When confronted by predictable or unpredictable tasks, the individual who adapts well chooses wisely between accommodation (changing self for environment) and assimilation (changing environment for self). Adaptability more clearly suggests the living interaction between worker and work environment.

A key but subtle concept is that, whereas adolescent vocational development progresses as the individual's career maturity increases, adult vocational development progresses as the individual's career adaptability increases. Vocational development does not end with career choice, but depends in adulthood on the ability to adapt rather than on the level of maturity.

Research was called for to respond to questions generated by the assumptions described above. The three presentations that follow this introduction comprise three researchers' individual work to answer those questions.

Dix (1990) studied adults in the establishment stage of career development to discern the adaptive tasks and coping strategies of the vocational developmental tasks of that stage (Crites, 1982): organizational adaptability, position performance, work habits and attitudes, co-worker relationships, advancement, and career choice and plans. She sought to make explicit the tacit knowledge career experts use to master the tasks. By making this knowledge explicit, she provided information that counselors can use to help workers who need skill development or enculturation.

Williams (1990) studied health-care employees in the maintenance stage of career development and discovered six components or tasks her subjects encountered in that stage. Behavioral responses to these tasks represented points on a worrying-doing continuum. She advocated that counselors encourage their clients to challenge themselves to go beyond their limits rather than settle for maintaining homeostasis.

Carden (1990) explored two models of mentoring and specified how mentoring helps adults adapt to tasks that arise in both the exploration stage and the maintenance stage. She listed the advantages and disadvantages of the experience of "protege" and "mentor" for both men and women.

Taken as a whole, this information contributes to elaborating how developmental career counselors comprehend client concerns and intervene to foster the development of career adaptability.

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